

VZCZCXRO6475
RR RUEHGR
DE RUEHPO #0436/01 2891807
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 151807Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0424
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1684
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 1662
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARAMARIBO 000436

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA - JROSHOLT

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT VENETIAAN'S STATE OF THE REPUBLIC -- OLD AND NEW PLANS

11. (U) Summary. President Venetiaan's September 29 State of the Republic speech made clear that he and his coalition government are finally moving into pre-election mode. In the lead-up to the 2010 elections, Venetiaan focused on the government's plans for development of the interior, and for implementing infrastructure, housing, and school projects. Most of the plans mentioned, however, were not new but plans that had been previously announced during his administration. While his 2007 speech focused on specific examples of bilateral cooperation, this year Venetiaan stressed multilateral cooperation -- and neglected to make specific mention of even China or Cuba as partners. As usual, Venetiaan made no direct reference to Suriname's partnership with the United States, although the President did, characteristically, indulge in a passing remark about the current financial crisis, in what used to be the most powerful country on earth. End Summary.

MULTILATERAL COOPERATION:
NO MENTION OF CHINA OR THE U.S

12. (U) On September 29, President Ronald Venetiaan held his annual, constitutionally required State of the Republic speech at the Parliament. Like last year, Venetiaan mentioned the global crises faced by small countries like Suriname, including natural disasters, food and energy crises, and war. Characteristically, the President also indulged in a passing swipe at the United States, referring to the current financial crisis, in what used to be the most powerful country on earth. (Note: This was the only allusion he made to the United States. End Note.) Venetiaan said his administration's policies and Suriname's flexibility spared Suriname from being strongly affected by these crises, but we need to stay vigilant. Unlike in previous years, when Venetiaan focused heavily on bilateral cooperation, during this year's speech he focused more on development based on cooperation with Suriname's multilateral partners, specifically referencing the United Nations, the Inter-American Development Bank, the European Union, and CARICOM. While it is customary for President Venetiaan to avoid mentioning support provided by the United States in his speeches, it was noticeable that he also did not refer to Suriname's partnerships with China and Cuba, as he had in 2007.

AMBITIOUS PLANS

13. (U) The President's speech seemed crafted to make clear that his administration is taking citizens' concerns seriously. With the 2005 inclusion of the A-Combination Party in the New Front plus coalition government, the administration is under increased political pressure from the Maroon parties and their constituencies to pay attention to the country's interior. In apparent response, Venetiaan mentioned ambitious plans for the interior, such as

economic stimulation projects, infrastructure projects in the interior, land rights for Maroons and indigenous peoples, and the building and renovating of schools and boarding schools. He also mentioned scheduled road rehabilitation/building along the coastal strip, in both the districts and inwards into the interior.

14. (U) Since the start of the current administration in 2005, there has been much controversy and public dissatisfaction regarding the government's land and housing policies. Making big pre-campaign promises, Venetiaan re-announced and went into detailed explanation of government plans to execute an electronic system of land management, build 900 low cost homes in various districts before the end of 2009, and continue to expand the current low cost housing programs. Venetiaan spent several minutes referencing the government's renewed focus on youth, the country's Youth Parliament, and sports. Suriname holds the portfolio for Culture, Gender, Youth and Sport within the CARICOM, and Venetiaan had been criticized after his 2007 speech for not mentioning either the Youth Parliament or policies on youth issues.

MIXED REACTIONS

15. (U) Reactions to the speech were mixed. Radjkoemar Randjietsingh, Secretary of the United Reform Party (VHP, coalition member party headed by Vice-President Ramdien Sardjoe), praised the government's prudent monetary policies and claimed the government's 2009 plans clearly show its long term planning vision. The political opposition characterized the speech as nothing new and said it provided no answer to the developmental challenges Suriname is facing. Sham Binda, Chairman of the Association for Small and Medium-Sized

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Enterprises, noted the absence of government plans for Public Sector Reform, the lack of policies to stimulate the production sector, and the lack of a policy to mitigate the effects of the rising gas prices on local production.

16. (U) Comment. With general elections only 18 months away and the current low approval ratings for the Venetiaan government, it was very important for the President to use his 2008 State of the Republic speech to start making re-election campaign promises. So he seized the opportunity to announce the government's plans for housing, land, and education, and to address other issues which have been bottlenecked over the past five years. There is nothing new, however, about the announced plans, as most had been previously announced by his administration. It is now more important than ever for the government to actually deliver on these promises, as Desi Bouterse's opposition National Democratic Party (NDP) and its Mammoth Coalition continue to ramp up for the 2010 elections by making promises, staging rallies, throwing parties, and continually accusing Venetiaan's administration of inaction. Faced with such an aggressive opponent, the President will do well to deliver on the promises he made on September 29. End Comment.

SCHREIBER HUGHES